

# The Greatest Gift

by Quirel

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Summary: For over half his life, Captain Mark Ramirez served in the UNSC Navy. Every engagement has been a brush with death. When the call to duty is given on Christmas, he reflects on why he and the rest of humanity keeps fighting, no matter the cost.

## The Greatest Gift

\_Five o'clock.\_

\_Five o'clock in the morning, and Danny was already awake. His five-year-old feet were pattering up and down the hallway, his hands rapping on the walls.\_

\_Mark, Captain Mark O. Ramirez, would have given anything for another two hours of sleep. Hell, couldn't the little brat wait that long?\_

\_He rolled over, drew the blankets closer to him, and snuggled closer to Tricia. The room was dark, with the only illumination coming from the digital clock in the wall, and a bar of light coming from under the door. The room was cold, perhaps because it was five below outside. But in the bed, it was warm enough for him and there was enough light for him to see his wife.\_

\_Tricia half-opened one hazel eye and looked at him, somehow managing to convey exasperation without changing her expression.\_

"\_Five o'clock. He let us sleep in this year."\_

"\_Any way we can get another hour?" Mark grunted irritably.\_

\_She closed her eyes and smiled, showing her pearly whites.\_

"\_The way you talk, you were never a kid."\_

"\_I was never THAT kid. He's making more noise than an all-out

Covenant assault."\_

\_She rolled on top of him, straddled his waist and stroked the stubble on his face. God, she was beautiful. From the auburn hair to the hazel eyes, even the freckles she still had at 26, all of the qualities that had drawn Mark to her when he was still in officer's school.\_

\_She was smart too, working towards a Masters in statistics while caring for an impetuous child. He wasn't around enough. Not around enough to care for Tricia, to be a father for Danny.\_

\_That's the way it had to be. If only there was some other way.\_

\_Mark reached up for her, embracing and pulling her closer to him. Their lips met, and they kissed. Sometimes the old clichés are true; though it only lasted for a few seconds, it was enough for a lifetime.\_

"\_WAKE UP! WAKE UP! IT'S CHRIS-MUSS! SANTA CAME!" Danny's high childish voice came from the other side of the bedroom door.\_

\_Tricia rolled off of Mark and got out of bed.\_

"\_Time to go take care of the little monster," Mark said, as he too got up.\_

"\_What do you expect? It's Christmas, and Santa came."\_

\_Mark rolled his eyes. 'Santa' had stayed up late last night wrapping presents, while his wife ran to the store to get some more wrapping paper. Now they were both dog-tired, half asleep. If that darn coffeemaker wasn't working, neither of them would make it through the morning.\_

\_Mark pulled on a pair of long johns and a tee-shirt, and then turned around to watch Tricia. She was standing in front of the mirror, actually a Hi-def video screen hooked to a few cameras. As Tricia stood in front of the screen and brushed her hair, an image of her, identical to the last pixel, brushed her hair too. At the edge of the screen, weather and local news were being shown.\_

\_Tricia finished brushing her auburn hair and donned a nightgown. After a brief hug, they both opened the door and stepped outside.\_

\* \* \*

>Slipspace was cold.<p><p>

No matter what you tried to do, you were always cold, deep down, in your bones.

In his earlier years, Captain Ramirez had tried everything to keep warm, from wearing sweaters to turning up the thermostat, and even bringing an electric heater on board.

Nothing worked. You were still cold.

He sat in his chair, hunched over, elbows on knees. If you wanted to brood, to reflect on life when you had nothing else to do, that was the best way to sit. No one disturbed you when you sat like that, no one. And you had plenty of time all to yourself.

As for life itself:

It was futile.

It wasn't always like that. There was once a time when being a Navy Captain was a rank of honor. Someone who enlisted into the Officers Corps could expect a long and eventful career, taken up with war games and patrols throughout the colonies. Maybe even an assault on a rebelling planet or a URF base. Afterwards, a person could retire with dignity and write a book, or hire himself out as a consultant to the shipyards.

It wasn't like that anymore.

Not since Harvest.

Now, when you tell a civilian that you are a Navy Officer, much less a Captain of a Cruiser, there was no difference, no respect. People merely pitied you.

Three to one.

That's how much you had to outnumber the Covenant, at the very least. Any less than that was suicide.

They were almost always wiped out. Ideally, they never fully engaged the Covenant warships. Just held them off long enough for the refugees to flee, before turning tail and running.

More often than not, however, they had to engage the Covenant. Charge the alien warships like the Polish cavalry of old, defending their besieged homeland with valiant rushes against the German Panzers.

Valiant, but futile.

The odds were against him. The odds said that he would die, that this ship would be gutted. If not at this engagement, it would be the next one, or the one after that. Eventually, the odds would catch up to him.

There was always that little voice in the back of his head, asking him what the Hell did he think he was doing. There were better ways to commit suicide than this.

\* \* \*

><em>The Christmas tree was a tradition that survived to this day.<em>

\_Of course, they were no longer \_actual\_ pine trees. Too much hassle, too hard on the environment, and far too much of a fire hazard.\_

\_The iconic Christmas lights and icicles was another victim of time,

and in this case, technology. Who would want to go to the trouble of decorating a tree, when you could buy a nice plastic one with an integrated fiber optics system? Particularly one that changed, swirled and sparkled, could show any color a person could imagine in any pattern.\_

\_One thing had never changed: The look on a five-year-old's face as he unwraps the treasures under the luminous tree.\_

\_Mark reclined on the couch, with Tricia leaning against him. The lights were toned down, and most of the illumination came from the fiber optic lights on the tree, slowly twinkling and sparkling as if the tree was covered in a fresh coating of snow.\_

\_Danny tore the wrapping paper off of the first present he picked out, coincidentally the largest. As the ribbon and shreds of paper began to hit the floor, Danny's eyes widened.\_

"\_Whoa!" He whispered. "DADDY, LOOK WHAT SANTA GOT ME!"\_

\_He picked up the box, half his size, and showed his parents. It was a huge Lego set, a scale model of a Marathon Cruiser, with a few smaller Longswords accompanying it (Also built to scale). The cover on the box boasted that the model was three quarters of a meter long, and that the MAC really worked.\_

\_Tricia looked at Mark. "Isn't that the kind of ship you fly, dear?"\_

\_She was talking to Mark, but Danny was supposed to be the recipient of that data. Danny set the box down, and his eyes grew even larger, surprisingly.\_

"\_You fly one of these? KEWEL!"\_

\_Mark shook his head ruefully. He had told Danny what he piloted, had once drawn a sketch of a Marathon, and even showed him pictures of the bridge and reactor complex. And Danny still went around like every parent was a Captain on a Marathon.\_

\_One Lego set later, and Mark was practically God.\_

\_He would never understand kids. That's why he liked them. That was one of the things he loved about his son.\_

\_Danny turned the box over, getting a look at the pictures in the back. Then he started to open it.\_

"\_Danny, aren't you going to play Santa Clause?"\_

\_Danny looked up, his innocent blue eyes twinkling, and then nodded. He crawled over to the scintillating tree and pulled out two presents, one for Mark and one for Tricia.\_

\_Mark saw the box Tricia had, and put his arm around her shoulders.\_

"\_You're going to love this," He whispered.\_

\_Tricia opened the small box Danny brought over, and then gasped.

Nestled in cotton were two silver earrings, with jade insets. They weren't large, but weren't too small either, just the perfect size for her. It had taken Mark all of fifteen minutes to find them, and he was rather proud of that.\_

\_She looked at him and grinned impishly. "You do realize that I don't have anything that matches these."\_

\_Right. It was a physical impossibility for her to have all those clothes and nothing that would match those earrings.\_

\_The earrings glittered in the light from the tree, glittered as Tricia put them on. They were beautiful, but she was radiant.\_

\_Danny was opening another present, the Lego set forgotten until later. This one was a video game, one of the multiple racing games released every year, each one nearly indistinguishable from the rest.\_

"\_Motorama!\_" Danny read the cover. "THANKS DAD!"\_

\_The phone rang.\_

\_Mark and Tricia froze, while Danny looked for more presents. Nobody called at this time, on this day. The phone call could mean only one thing. \_

\_The phone rang again, its bleating tone shattering the morning tranquility.\_

"\_It's probably a wrong number," Mark told to Tricia. As if that were possible. As if the Covenant wouldn't dare attack another colony on this day, of all days.\_

\_Mark warily got up from the couch, walking past the miniature Nativity scene (another tradition that survived to this day) and into the kitchen, where the phone was.\_

\_A minute later, Mark walked back into the living room, his face ashen. One nod to Tricia, a silent confirmation of what they had feared the most. Tricia fell silent, the light fading from her eyes, the smile receding a few centimeters. Danny noticed nothing, absorbed in a pack of plastic soldiers he had just got.\_

\_Mark looked down at the present Danny had handed him. It read: to Mark, from Tricia.\_

\_Below that, it said: "For the man who has everything."\_

\_That's right. He did have everything. He had his family, and he had his job. Because of his family, his job came first. The irony always left a bitter taste in his mouth. \_

\_Mark opened the box. It was a clear block of crystal, about the size of his fist. Little white dots, engraved with a laser, showed a three-D picture of Mark, Tricia, and Danny. It was them posing for their Christmas photo; she must have had it made only days ago.\_

\_As Mark stared at the happy family, the faces looking out from the

block of crystal, he distantly felt Tricia draw close, hugging him, her silent tears slowly being absorbed by his shirt.\_

\* \* \*

>Captain Ramirez fingered the oblong crystal block, gazing at the image of himself inside, flanked by the two people he loved. Studying every dot, every feature, and every nuance of the object. And with a sigh, he set the crystal down on his desk.<p><p>

If only, if only.

A man's house was his castle. Not so for Mark. He was not home enough to claim his house; it was merely a dreamscape he visited occasionally, and harbored the precious memories of it afterwards.

His desk was his castle; he knew its every nook and cranny, every function and feature. From here, he monitored the vitals of his kingdom, the ship entrusted unto him. He could communicate any of his subordinates at any time, could monitor every weapon system, every aspect of the ship's defense from his desk.

But then, he had people to do that for him. Twenty people; he knew all of them like they were his children. They trusted and respected him, worked faithfully for him. He in return asked for no more than they could give, and did more than he should to keep them safe.

He never brought any of his crew into battle, not without telling them what they were up against.

Captain Ramirez looked over the holoscreens on his desk, taking in the vitals of the ship. Particular attention was paid to the readouts from the Slipspace drives.

Ten minutes.

Ten minutes until the fog of Slipspace fell away, and they found themselves somewhere within the target solar system.

Captain Ramirez rose from his chair, set the crystal down on his desk, and walked to the front of the bridge. An aisle led past cubicles on either side, to a viewscreen in the front. The screen was offline; there was nothing to show in Slipspace.

He stood with his back to the screen, his arms folded in front of him. Everyone, from Warkentine at Communications to DuBois at the Navigation booth, everyone had their eyes on him.

Captain Ramirez pressed a button on his headset. Immediately, the PA system throughout the ship switched on; everyone could hear the Captain speak..

"Ladies and gentlemen," he spoke, inwardly kicking himself for such a lame start. He was good at impromptu speeches, but what can one say about this?

"Ladies and gentlemen, if we could set aside the next few minutes, I have a message I would like to share with you."

"Three weeks ago, on Christmas, we were home. Three weeks ago, we were watching our kids open their presents, or attending Mass, maybe even spending the day with that special person. Three weeks ago, death and destruction were the last things from our minds."

"Then, we got the call, and we came."

Captain Ramirez began pacing the deck, running his hands through his hair. A Captain was never to look nervous or agitated in front of his or her crew; it was terrible for morale. He could care less. He trusted each and every member of his crew, and all he asked was that they trust him in return. Trust them to keep him alive.

"Why did we report for duty?"

"We all know the odds against us. Three to one. That's how much we need to outnumber the Covenant, and even then we come away with serious losses."

"Unknown. That's what we are up against. We don't know how many there are. We don't know how strong they are. We don't know if they are still there."

"Eight capital ships. That's how strong we are."

Silence. Captain Ramirez waited for his words to sink in. He shared the odds with the crewmembers. He had told them just how bad it was. Now he had to turn that around, if he could.

"Now, I would like you to reflect on something."

> "You all knew the odds, and yet you left your homes and your families when the call came. Why did you do that? Why are you laying your lives on the line, especially on this day, of all days."<p>

"I'm quite sure that many of you have been asking yourselves this very question."

Another pause. Ramirez knew that every man and woman on the ship was intently listening to his words. Amidst the uncertainty, he was the voice of reason, calmly laying all the cards down on the table.

"The truth is you aren't fighting for the UNSC. Nobody fights for his country, nobody fights for his colony. No man fights for Governments, or for Ideals."

"The truth is you are fighting for the people you love, the people you left. Because some day, the Covenant will find the colony we left, and they will glass it without a thought about the ones we loved. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but one day."

"I can't speak for everybody; maybe somebody on this ship disagrees with me. But I say, if our sacrifices buy our friends and family even one more day, then it was worth it. If we fight, then we are still alive, and what we love remains hidden, safe."

"That is one of the greatest gifts you can give anyone."

Ramirez sighed. He felt older somehow. He forced himself to conclude. He had to finish this. More for himself than for the

crewmembers.

"Picture the person who you are fighting for, and always remember them. So long as they are in your hearts, so long as you have their memoriesâ€|"

He swallowed. He could feel his eyes moisten. It was all falling together now, all the pieces of the puzzle fitting together, even as he said it.

"Then, no matter what happens, no matter what other people say, no matter how unstoppable the Covenant is; our fight will never be in vain."

"Thank you."

Captain Ramirez reached for his headset, and turned it off. Silence returned to the bridge. In perfect silence, Captain Ramirez walked back to his desk and sat down. Everyone else was sitting at their consoles, reflecting on his words.

Captain Ramirez checked the consoles at his desk.

Five minutes left.

Ramirez reached over, and picked up the crystal. He cradled it in his hands, gazing at his wife and son, his silent tears falling and splashing over the surface of the crystal.

\* \* \*

>Two and a half millennia ago, Christ had been born, so that he could die to save Humanity.<p><p>

Captain Mark Ramirez was willing to do the same, if only for the two people in his life.

\* \* \*

><strong>AN: I feel like I should explain this. Not really up to my standards.<strong>

\*\*I wrote it as a promo piece for the Halo Homefront Mod (Check it out on the ModDB). They wanted a short fic about how Humanity is losing the war in space, about how heavy the odds are so stacked against the UNSC. And yet the UNSC keeps fighting.\*\*

\*\*Well, Read and Review, and don't forget the constructive criticism.\*\*

\*\*Merry Christmas! \*\*

End  
file.